



Plant, Peter; Thomsen, Rie

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Orientación y Sociedad

2011, vol. 11.

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Cita Sugerida

Plant, P; Thomsen, R (2011) Career guidance in Denmark: Social control in a velvet glove. Orientación y Sociedad, 11. En Memoria Académica. Disponible en: http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/art_revistas/pr.5157/pr.5157.pdf

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CAREER GUIDANCE IN DENMARK: SOCIAL CONTROL IN A VELVET GLOVE

Peter Plant* & Rie Thomsen**

Abstract

Career guidance in Denmark is well organised, highly structured, and professionalised. This mirrors the strong policy focus on the role of guidance as a soft societal steering instrument. With this backdrop, the dilemma in Danish guidance is the delicate balance between guidance as an instrument for personal development, and guidance as social control

Introduction

“There is a clear consensus in Europe that high quality guidance and counselling services play a key role in supporting lifelong learning, career management and achievement of personal goals.”(CEDEFOP, 2009, p. 1). This consensus includes Denmark¹, and it has had a significant impact on policy-making and practice in this area, as policy efforts and increased resources, over the last decade, have been focused on establishing a coherent system for guidance and counseling for young people. Adult guidance is still somewhat fragmented.

* Ph.D., Faculty of Arts, Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark, pepl@dpu.dk

** Ph.D., Faculty of Arts, Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark, riet@dpu.dk

¹ Denmark is a Nordic democratic welfare state with 5 mill inhabitants, member of the European Union (EU)

The Danish term for counseling is '*vejledning*', i.e. leading someone on the way. It covers both personal counseling, school counseling, educational and vocational guidance and counseling, career guidance and development and supervision of students during their college and university studies. According to the 2004 EU Resolution on Lifelong Guidance, which has been adopted by Denmark and all other EU member states, guidance refers to: "A range of activities that enables citizens of any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competences are learned and/or used." (EU, 2004). In this Resolution, guidance activities include: information and advice giving, counseling, competence assessment, mentoring, advocacy, teaching decision-making, and career management skills. In short, the term best suited to cover this broad array of activities, is the term guidance, which is also the concept widely adopted in many European countries, and in trans-European coordinating bodies such as the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN), of which Denmark is a highly active member, both as policy makers and in an expert role. Thus, Danish educational/vocational/career guidance has attracted increasing political attention over the past few years. This has had positive effects in terms of e.g. professionalisation of guidance. But this policy focus also has a darker side: remarkable and controversial developments with social control aspects have occurred as a result of this process, as discussed by Thomsen & Plant (2011), the points of which this article draws greatly from. It is to these that we now turn.

The historical development of educational, vocational, and career guidance in Denmark, dating back to the 1880s when psychometric testing was seen as a modern approach (Plant, 2009), has resulted in what is now viewed as a coherent guidance system, with a focus on youth. Guidance for adults is more diverse and somewhat scattered across different sectors and providers. The Danish Ministry of Education defines the purpose of the Danish guidance system in these terms: *“In accordance with the ideas underlying the Danish legislation on guidance, guidance is regarded as a continuous process that should help young people become more conscious of their abilities, interests and possibilities, thus enabling them to make decisions regarding education and employment on a qualified basis. The youth guidance centres may be considered the first step in a lifelong guidance process”* (UVM, 2008). Further, a number of regional guidance centers provide guidance for young adults. Both types of centers are described in the following sections.

School and youth guidance: comprehensive reforms

A comprehensive reform on the educational and vocational guidance system for young people in Denmark was passed in 2003, known as the Act on Guidance in Relation to Choice of Education, Training and Career (UVM, 2003). This, in fact, removed school-based guidance from schools, and placed the activities in municipal/regional centers, working in conjunction with schools, other educational institutions and other relevant partners.

The reform concerned educational guidance of young people up until age 25; it established 48 public youth guidance centres and 7 regional public guidance centres, which were in operation by 2004. Before 2004 guidance structures were seen as (too) diverse: 27 types of

officially recognized guidance services existed side by side in loosely coordinated networks (OECD, 2002). Most of the services were situated within educational institutions, and based on the model of the part-time teacher-counselor. This model was criticized as being too patchy, and the 2003 reform mirrored the findings and recommendations of the 2002 OECD Guidance Review Country Note on the Danish guidance system (OECD, 2002) in a remarkable synergy between national guidance policies and international OECD recommendations, as pointed out by Plant (2009).

The focus of the 2003 reform was the notion that the educational guidance system should support a choice of education and career which should be of benefit to both the individual *and* the society. And that the individual's interests and personal qualifications, as well as the anticipated need for qualified labour and self-employment, should be taken into account in the guidance process. Furthermore the establishing of a coherent guidance system should be targeted especially at young people with a special need for guidance; contribute to a reduction of drop-out rates; contribute to improving the individual's ability to seek and use information about choices of education and career; be independent of institutional and sector specific interests; and lead to the improvement of the qualifications and competences of guidance counsellors (UVM, 2011b).

The delivery of the youth guidance system is divided between the municipalities and the Ministry of Education, with different responsibilities and obligations. Thus, the centers are regulated by law and publicly financed. The centers are seen as 'independent', which reflects the aim to offer guidance which is free of specific educational institutions and interests. The concept of independence refers back to an older ideal of neutrality, i.e. impartial guidance. The present centers, however, are far from being independent in the

sense of NGOs, and certainly not independent from the local policies of municipalities of which they are an integral part, or the comprehensive monitoring and quality assurance (i.e. controlling) system of the Ministry of Education. The centralized and top-down quality assurance system is the hub of a monitoring approach, with a particular societal focus on the role of guidance in relation to drop-out and retention rates, and with a view to benchmarking the services' performance against each other. The responsibility, financially and on a daily basis, lies with the municipality (youth guidance centres, known as UU) or the Ministry of Education (regional guidance centres, known as Studievalg) on a contractual basis. These contracts are highly specific in terms of targets, priorities, delivery modes, and economy.

48 Youth guidance centres covering 98 municipalities

Youth guidance centres (Ungdommens Uddannelsesvejledning, UU) are responsible for guidance related to the transition from compulsory school to youth education. The main target groups for the youth guidance centres are: pupils in lower secondary school - forms 6 to 10; youth under the age of 25 Not in Education, Employment or Training (known as NEET in English); other young people under the age of 25 who seek guidance in relation to youth education programmes or employment; and youth with a special need for guidance concerning choice of education, vocation and career - a transverse target group of young people with various problems related to the continuation or completion of an education programme (Cirius, 2008).

One particular feature of these activities is the outreach nature of youth guidance: guidance professionals will visit the homes of young people who are not in education, training or employment to make sure that they are 'active' in the sense that the law prescribes, to

prevent them from falling into the NEET category. This is social control in practice, and such outreach activities walk the thin line between guidance as an offer and guidance as an obligation. Guidance is both a public and a private good, and currently the balance between the two create tensions between guidance seen as a personal development on the one hand, and as social control on the other.

7 regional guidance centres covering the whole country

The regional guidance centres (Studievalg) are responsible for guidance in relation to the transition from youth education to higher education, and the main target groups are: students in youth education programmes; young people and adults outside the education system who wish to enter a higher education programme; students in youth education programmes with an extended need for guidance concerning choice of education, vocation and career (Cirius, 2008).

Non-school guidance

However, guidance for young people in Denmark is not reduced to the guidance centres. There are other services, for instance as a part of the educational system. In educational institutions guidance professionals work with a range of activities to increase the completion rate. This is often done in co-operation with personal mentors and other types of personal support. The services operate under various legal rules covering specific educational institutions (upper secondary education, vocational training, etc). Educational institutions are obliged to offer guidance about the courses the institution offers and career guidance in relation to the transition from education to employment. Guidance professionals also work with competence assessment activities (Thomsen, 2007). Social

workers, mentors, and psychologists add to the diversity of guidance offers in these institutions. The above-mentioned activities are publicly funded; the number of private providers is minimal, but growing, as the public guidance centres increasingly are obliged to serve those ‘in need’, The NEETs.

In addition to the guidance centers, the 2003 act on guidance also commits the Ministry of Education to deliver information on education and training possibilities at all levels; on vocations/professions; on labour market conditions and statistics; and on study programs taught in English at Danish colleges and universities. This is done through a web-based national guidance portal, known as www.ug.dk, which includes a national e-guidance platform that allows for personal guidance through “e-channels” which consist of a wide variety of virtual communication and guidance tools, such as phone, online chat, webcam, text messages and e-mail. E-guidance is primarily aimed at resourceful youths and their parents, but adults also use the service for their own needs. One of the purposes of E-guidance is to ease the workload of guidance counsellors at the guidance centres: this is yet to be seen. E-guidance is served by professional guidance counsellors and cooperates with the youth guidance centres, the regional guidance centres and the national guidance portal in a decentralized structure.

The Danish adult education associations also engage in guidance activities with the individuals they encounter, and several trade unions also offer their members career guidance. Jobcentres in the municipalities also offer some adult guidance. And from 2010 much vocational adult guidance has been offered by 13 regional Adult and Continuing Education Centres, known as VEU-centres, based mainly on existing regional Labour Market Training Centres (AMU). These structures are networks of adult guidance and adult

training/education providers. In short, adult guidance is a patchwork of providers rather than a coherent system.

However, to ensure a coherent system and cross-sectoral cooperation between the youth guidance centers, and the regional guidance centres and the educational system, the Danish legislation on guidance emphasizes that the youth guidance centres are obliged to cooperate closely with primary and lower secondary schools and youth education institutions in the local area, local business life, and the public employment services/job centers.

The regional guidance centres must cooperate with relevant partners in their region. Here, the relevant partners are: youth education, higher education institutions, the social partners, industry and commerce (Cirius, 2008). Thus, the 2003 act on guidance produces a multiple structure by emphasizing cooperation between different cross-sectoral partners. This can be seen as one of the strengths of the Danish guidance system. Still, a genuine life-long guidance approach is a vision of the future to come.

In terms of cooperation on the national policy-making level, the Ministry of Education has established a National Dialogue Forum for Guidance, based on the above-mentioned Act on Guidance of 2003. This forum provides a platform for dialogue between the ministry, relevant organizations such as educational institutions, the municipalities, national employers' and employees' organizations, trade unions, guidance professionals' associations, youth organizations, end users, and individuals holding a leading position in the field of guidance in Denmark, including academics. The forum should also aim to develop and enhance the level of quality in Danish guidance services (UVM, 2011b). In practice, however, it functions as a forum of debate, rather than a policy-making body.

Regional guidance co-operation and co-ordination fora existed until 2004, when they were abandoned as part of the Guidance Reform.

Counselor education/training

The 2003 Guidance Reform act and later amendments set the standards for guidance counselor qualifications. Guidance counselors employed in the guidance centers can obtain qualifications in three ways: (1) a Bachelor's degree in the field of public administration with focus on educational and vocational guidance; (2) a Diploma degree in educational, vocational and career guidance; or a Master's degree in Guidance. The Bachelor's degree and the diploma degree, aiming at educating career guidance practitioners in all sectors, are obtained at University Colleges, whereas the Master's degree obtained at DPU, Faculty of Arts, Aarhus University, aims at research, leadership, development, evaluation and teaching in guidance and counseling. (NVL, 2009). Both the diploma degree and the master degree are offered as part time studies over two years, i.e. 60 points according to the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System). Entry requirements for both the diploma degree and master degree are, as a minimum, a completed short or medium-cycle (2-year) higher education program and 2 years of relevant working experience; entry requirements for the bachelor program is high school certificate. The above-mentioned Bachelor's degree in public administration includes a 90 ECTS specialization in career guidance, including a practicum of 20 ECTS.

The diploma degree is offered at 6 University Colleges under the same curriculum. The curriculum refers to the fields of sociology, economy and trade (UVM, 2011a), but the specific course plans and literature reflect inspiration from pedagogics and psychology. The

diploma degree is the main qualification route for 200-300 students per year on a national level. The course consists of 4 compulsory Modules: Guidance and The Guidance Practitioner (10 ECTS), Guidance and The Individual (10 ECTS) and Guidance and The Society (10 ECTS) and a Master's Thesis (15 ECTS). All modules include exams with external examiners from a national team of authorized censors. Additionally, three modules can be chosen from: Adult Guidance (5 ECTS), Career Choice and Choice Processes – Theories and Practice (10 ECTS), Guidance in Educational Institutions (10 ECTS), Special Needs for Guidance (10 ECTS), Innovation and Quality in Guidance environments (10 ECTS), Transitional Guidance in Primary School (5 ECTS), Intercultural Guidance and Counseling (5 ECTS), Mentoring and Arrangements of Mentoring (5 ECTS) and the writing of a final thesis (15 ECTS). These modules have internal exams. Guidance counselors who have worked as such and who (through workplace learning or in-formal learning) have obtained competences equal to the qualifications obtained through the diploma courses, can apply for a competence assessment at the University Colleges. A detailed procedure describes this assessment which is conducted in relation to specific modules, elements in modules or the complete diploma qualifications in educational, vocational and career guidance.

The Master's Degree in Guidance, on the other hand, offers four modules: (1) career guidance and career development theories; (2) career guidance, society, and guidance policies; (3) career guidance methods; and (4) Master's Thesis. It is worth noting, in relation to the psychology-oriented tradition of many other countries, that Denmark has followed a broader, more pedagogical/educational route in terms of the above-mentioned qualification routes. This tradition dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, where the combined

roles of teacher-counsellors were seen as the main model, based on a person-centred approach, which, in turn, was a reaction against the then prevailing rather mechanistic psychometric testing tradition of German origin (Plant, 2009).

Counseling practices, theoretical foundations, and research

North American/ Canadian and British theories on career counseling and career development have had an impact on Danish and Nordic guidance counselors, since WW2. Earlier, the German psychometric influence was widespread. In recent years, life-span theories, socio-dynamic/constructivist/constructionist approaches, along with solution-focused, coaching, and career learning approaches to guidance and counseling have been adopted. An overview in Danish of some of these career guidance and career development theories is available (Højdal & Poulsen, 2007). Systemic theory and philosophical counseling have also inspired the Danish guidance counselors, along with rational decision making, solution-focused counseling, planned happenstance, and positive uncertainty approaches. In short, quite a range of approaches and concepts are adopted. Løve (2005) noted that the Danish guidance profession has been inspired by three approaches: (1) a Rogerian person centred approach; (2) eclectic step-by-step models; (3) constructivist approaches. Thus, Danish guidance counselors do not work with a singular point of inspiration, but, eclectically, with several different ones (Plant, 2011). The individual interview is the main guidance activity. Thus, the sheer numbers of individual interviews call for creativity in terms of developing innovative methodologies, including the use of ICT, as pointed out by Plant (2007a). Many guidance counselors have been inspired by systemic theories, socio-cultural approaches to learning, and coaching techniques. Group

methodologies and integrative approaches such as workplace-based guidance (Plant, 2007b) and guidance in communities (Thomsen, 2009) can be viewed as part of a collective turn in Danish career guidance in a search for a more efficient use of resources; a hunt for approaches that help avoid individualization; a search for new ways of targeting the demand for diverse guidance approaches; and as a way of exploring other ways of organizing guidance. Thomsen (2009) found that young people in transition from upper secondary education valued that guidance resources were available in their immediate surroundings: guidance was carried out in hallways, during lunch breaks, or on fieldtrips, rather than in the office of the guidance counselor. The same reaction was found among adult workers in a downsizing factory.

On the whole, in terms of research in guidance, there is a plethora of guidance studies, mostly of a qualitative nature (Plant, 2003). Evidence-based approaches, however, are of increasing interest, especially to policy makers. As an example of this trend, a recent review of international research, mainly American studies, searched for evidence on the effects of guidance at transition points (Larsen, Christensen, Tiftiki, & Nordenbo, 2011). One of the focal points was how to target most efficiently the diversity of those in 'real' need of guidance. However, most studies had difficulties in demonstrating specific effects or impacts. The main conclusions pointed to a need for more integrated and holistic guidance approaches. Similar points have been made by Thomsen & Jensen (2011) on the basis of mixed (qualitative/quantitative) research methods.

Generally, the policy focus since 2003 has been on what is labeled 'youth with special guidance needs'. This term has been pivotal for policy development and professional practice discussions in recent years. It gives guidance a particular focus on the

marginalized, the drop-outs, the push-outs. Other, more general guidance needs tend to be neglected, or referred to E-guidance. When the 2003 Act on guidance was amended in 2008 once again, the changes were based on a national evaluation of the 2003 act (EVA, 2007; Rolls & Cort, 2010). The evaluator, Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA), pointed to the fact that the term ‘young people with special guidance needs’ was used very inconsistently, and that there were no common reference points amongst the practitioners, both within and across the different guidance sectors. It was emphasized that the term youth with ‘special guidance needs’ connotated with ‘special needs education’, i.e. education for people with different physical or mental disabilities. On this basis, later amendments to the 2003 reform – there have been several – defined target groups in these terms: “The delivery of guidance should especially be targeted at young people who have or could have difficulties in choosing, taking up and completing an education or a vocation without an intensified guidance effort” (our translation). This turned the focus from young people with special guidance needs to young people in need of intensified guidance efforts. This, in turn, spurred a discussion on whether an intensified guidance effort means more of the same, for instance more individual interviews, or whether it means developing new guidance activities that target young people in different ways, and in ways that take diversity issues such as gender, socio-economic factors and ethnicity into account.

Conclusions

Danish educational and vocational guidance is inspired by North American and British guidance theories and approaches; the overall activity is the individual interview based on dialogical methodologies, but new inspirations are emerging, including collective

approaches. The 2003 act on guidance aimed at professionalizing and de-institutionalizing the former part-time Danish school-counselors, based on the idea of impartiality, and even independence, in terms of guidance structures. The institutional independence, however, is questionable, and clearly policy-driven. Guidance, on the whole, is strongly policy-driven, rather than being a policy driver from a professional point of view.

Most guidance counselors are now employed in full time positions in municipal or regional guidance centers. Danish guidance counselors are inspired by a plethora of theories and approaches, mainly by person-centred, constructivist, and lately socio-cultural approaches.

The etymological meaning of the Danish word 'vejledning' is 'leading someone on the way', And the 2003 Act on Guidance established how guidance counselors should lead young people on the way to what is considered mainstream normality, where participation in social life takes place through work and/or education. This is part of the social contract in a welfare state such as Denmark. Thus, in a societal and governmentality perspective, guidance can be viewed as one of the soft steering mechanisms of society: through guidance, people will make choices that will meet the interest of both themselves as individuals, and of the society, i.e. in practice, the labour market. This, however, leaves little room for alternative choices, and the social control aspect is evident, which became abundantly clear in a recent legislative initiative, known as the Youth Packages from 2010 on youth education and employment. They established an obligation to stay in education or work on the basis of both incentives and economic social welfare sanctions directed towards young people. This showed a profound difference in relation to other Nordic countries: whereas Norway and Iceland have established young people's *right* to education (and guidance), the government (2001-2011) of Denmark chose to establish this as an

obligation. Such issues are far from being matters of rhetoric, as there are fundamental differences between holding the *right to a good* or *being obliged* to make specific choices at certain points in your life. This places guidance in an intricate social control role (Plant, 2010), policing the borders of societal normalization, as pointed out above. Thus, guidance in this picture takes the form of social control, disguised as a helping hand in a velvet glove.

In short, the future of guidance lies embedded in the renewed policy focus on guidance, where one scenario is represented in the present centre of attention on social control and economic sanctions. This is an impasse: it locks guidance to the role of preserving a societal status quo situation, where the opposite is badly needed in the present time of profound economic, social, and ecological changes and challenges.

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